

Can COP26 cope with Climate & COVID19?

(Figure 1: city skyline before and during coronavirus lockdown)

*“When we see the Earth from space, we see ourselves as a whole ... one planet, one human race.”*¹

*“climate change presents a tangible environmental problem, it is not the only one, and it won’t be the last. ... We’d better practise our global governance because we might need to respond to something ... on a far shorter timescale. What exactly? That’s the point: we don’t know yet.”*²

Well we do now! When drafting the article for the previous edition of *Landscape*,³ and considering the alignment of thinking between the UN, UK & Scottish Governments, and Glasgow City, a small still voice at the back of my mind posed the rhetorical question “what could possibly go wrong” and, contemplating the alchemy of international affairs, I quoted Harold McMillan: *‘Events dear boy, Events’*. I confess, I had nothing specific in mind beyond the caprice of international leaders, terrorism, extreme weather events and an awareness that China and Asian countries were facing a new SARS virus. The copy was sent off on 27th January, two days before the first confirmed case in the UK. By the time the piece appeared in print, the UK, and half the world, was in lockdown. COP26 was postponed until summer 2021, along with the Tokyo Olympics and almost everything else.

This is a cruel and severe pandemic with an omnipresent shadow of grief, stress, worry and fear. We lament those lost, carry in our hearts those in front line services and watch in disbelief as many – who should have known better – recalibrate their view of who matters in society. Occupations, whose value the readers of this journal will never have doubted.

As lockdown wears on what are we learning? And specifically, what are we learning for landscape and urban design? We have learned that some people have just realised the importance of parks and greenspace in cities, especially in areas of high density where balconies are also important since some people don’t have gardens. Because guess what, these assets are important for people’s health. Who knew?

By the time you read this, it will be old news that the redistribution of road space (called for over many decades by landscape architects, urban designers and urbanists) has come to pass by the magical device of the TRRO (temporary traffic regulation order), as local authorities across the UK are liberated from, or compelled by, Government to make more space available for social distancing to enable a gradual release from lockdown following the lead of cities such as Milan and Paris. (Figure 2: Realignment of road use in Milan)

There is a wide-ranging conversation to be had about the parameters of what any ‘new normal’ should be. As I write, the Scottish Government has published a plain English document to begin what First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has referred to as an ‘adult conversation’ with the people of Scotland.⁴ From this and other emerging Government papers and media commentary, we may expect a discourse around the interrelated concerns of public health; an inclusive economy; place and community; and a low-carbon society. Resilience will be a central and cross-cutting theme likely addressed in three phases – a slow, short-term transition extending social distancing and shielding with an examination of what this means

for the adaptation and management of public space; a structural transition through the mid-term with a (probably severe) recession when designers will be asked to consider the role of community and place in the restructuring; and, a longer term transition to an inclusive net zero carbon economy with an imagined reality of how future places will look and function and what conditions will need to be put in place to achieve this.⁵

Strategically, and thanks to agencies such as the ESA and NASA, the causal relationship between industrial activity, air pollution and climate change has become all too clear – quite literally.⁶ (Figure 3: Nitrogen dioxide concentrations over Europe in 2019 and 2020) Furthermore, initial medical evidence suggests that the severity of Coronavirus, particularly the likelihood of death, is directly linked to higher levels of air pollution.⁷

This coincidence of challenges is not new. In the modern era, thinkers and polemicists like Geddes, Carson, McHarg, Lovelock and Attenborough have been informing, encouraging, exhorting – telling us for generations to make a difference. Now, however, the evidence of the causal links is undeniable and there is finally a growing realisation that we can no longer ‘grow’ our way out of these challenges through technological innovation, economic growth and novel means of resource exploitation. There are just too many of us. In the Anthropocene, humanity is swarming the earth.⁸ Perhaps we need a ‘climate clock’ or ‘human species clock’ which, like the ‘nuclear clock’ of the 60s, 70s and 80s is set perpetually at a minute to midnight.

We have a globally interconnected challenge now seen in high contrast as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic. Better ways of thinking economics, ecology, ‘connexity’ and design are needed. Hope and an extensive literature predicated on the interconnectedness of planet, humanity and ecosphere are driving policy nationally and internationally ... where enlightenment shines.⁹

A group of UN agencies has begun a mid-pandemic review of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* under the working title “build back better”.¹⁰ Given the pace of the work for those of us involved in the supporting international expert panels working together over online platforms, we might expect this work to be a building block for the UN agenda for 2021.

Will COP26 go ahead next year? Will it cope with Covid? It has to. There is a renewed sense of urgency and determination. The UNECE had planned a November meeting in Glasgow to coincide with COP as originally planned. They will proceed and expand the planned discussion to embrace the interaction of health and climate. If by then it is not possible to undertake the meeting face-to-face, it will be done online with the *Forum of Mayors* and with the City of Glasgow. That may even be better. As Hawking said in his final 2018 message: “Be brave, be determined, overcome the odds. It can be done!”¹¹

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¹ 2018 message from Stephen Hawking re-broadcast by the European Space Agency to mark Earth DAY 2020. Full Story available at <http://www.esa.int/esearch?q=ESA+Earth+Day+Stephen+Hawking>, Accessed 25April2020

² Berners-Lee, M., *There is no Planet 'B'*, Cambridge University Press, 2019, p3 (Berners-Lee's book is an excellent primer. He was hinting at the pandemic risk).

³ Evans, B.M. 'Glasgow 2020 – a fair COP?', in Lincoln, P. (ed) *Landscape*, Issue 2, 2020

⁴ Coronavirus (COVID-19): framework for decision making, <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-framework-decision-making/>, Accessed 25April2020

⁵ Early discussions with a number of parties including the Scottish Futures Trust, Sustrans, the Scottish Government Improvement service and the Academy of Urbanism: <https://www.scottishfuturestrust.org.uk>, <https://sustrans.org.uk>, <https://www.improvementservice.org.uk>, <https://www.academyofurbanism.org.uk>

⁶ European Space Agency Available at http://www.esa.int/Applications/Observing_the_Earth/Copernicus/Sentinel-5P/Air_pollution_remains_low_as_Europeans_stay_at_home, Accessed 25April2020

⁷ See for example the New York Times (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/climate/air-pollution-coronavirus-covid.html>) and The Guardian (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/mar/17/air-pollution-likely-to-increase-coronavirus-death-rate-warn-experts>) Accessed 25April2020

⁸ Evans, B.M. "Empower people to co-design place", keynote address to *People – Place – Power*, Solace Scotland Conference, (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives), Glasgow September 2019.

⁹ The cocktail of climatic, socio-demographic (ageing, low fertility, migration, health) and technological (automation, augmented reality and artificial intelligence) change that encapsulates the spirit of our times. Evans, *Landscape*, 2020 Op cit. See for example: Mariana Mazzucato, *The value of Everything: Making and Taking in the Global Economy*; Kate Rayworth, *Doughnut Economics*; Simon Lewis & Mark Maslin, *The Human Planet: How we created the Anthropocene*; Mike Berners-Lee, *There is NO Planet B*; Danny Dorling & Kirsten McClure, *Slowdown: The end of the great acceleration and why its good for the planet, the economy, and our lives ...* and many others.

¹⁰ *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld/publication>, Accessed 25April2020. The agencies involved in the review work are UN-Habitat, UN-DESA (Department of Economic and 'Social Affairs); UNECE (Economic Commission for Europe), UNESCAP (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific), UNODC (Office on Drugs and Crime) supported by international expert panels.

¹¹ Stephen Hawking, Op cit.